DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 099 916 CS 500 911

AUTHOR	Manning, Nick
TITLE	Film Festivals: A First Step for Independents.
PUB DATE	Aug 74
NOTE	13p.; Paper presented at the University Film Association Program (Windsor, Ontario, August 1974)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS	Audiences; *Creative Art; *Film Production; *Films; *Futures (of Society)
IDENTIFIERS	*Film Festivals; Noncommercial Films

ABSTRACT

In order for filmmaking to be a true art form, the filmmaker needs to be free both to conceive and realize a personal vision and to remain independent of rating codes, length prescriptions, the market, sterile formats, and other imposed limitations. Moreover, if noncommercial films are to succeed in the next decade, a respectful audience must be found which allows the film artist his freedom. The film festival can provide the filmmaker with the necessary latitude as well as with predistribution feedback, a review, recognition, objective audience criticism, and experienced emendations from the jury. Control of the film festival should be free and widespread, while five general areas should be watched carefully--the jury, prize money, efficiency, the guarantee to the entrant in the "call-for-entries," and entry fees. (JM)

ED 099916

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

FILM FESTIVALS: A FIRST STEP FOR INDEPENDENTS

by Nick Manning*

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Nick Manning
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

Paper Presented at the
University Film Association Program
Windsor, Ontario, Canada
August, 1974

CS 500 911

*Independent filmmaker for 13 years, Director of Independent Filmmakers' Exposition for 9 years, Ph.D. in film from Syracuse University.

FILM FESTIVALS: A FIRST STEP FOR INDEPENDENTS
by Nick Manning*

Without laboring the point - getting paid for making films in the U.S. is difficult, and if the films are your own conception - the situation can be downright dismal. If you count film and video among the fine arts, it is surely the poorest of the lot. "Poor" may not seem to be the right term when box-office figures for commercial features are common lingo but how many films haven't been made primarily for box office? Can you name a financially successful film that did not rely to some extent on big business, corporate money, venture capital, tax write-offs, etc? Most films are commodities bought for and sold by the only interests big enough to handle them - and the makers with their "art" are swept along by these corporate manipulators. Can a filmmaker, in any phase of the business call himself an artist if he is not independent? Can you picture Henry Moore being given a commission and then told what to delete or add to his sculpture - or changes made after completion? This lack of autonomy and control is commonplace with the most highly respected commercial filmmakers, whose "talent" provides their stock in trade, like a batting average. Most filmmakers are ultimately guided by pressure to sell a product or gain a profitable box office. Even though one may aspire to loftier aims, the typical film producer, director, etc., will continue to work in the medium on the basis of his ability to please a general audience.

Independent, non-commercial filmmaking is where "poor" takes on meaning. If film and video are truly art-forms, a person must be able to reflect and order perceptions unfettered by formats, conventions and visits from welfare inspectors. But independence in film and video is an expensive luxury.

* Independent filmmaker for 13 years, Director of Independent Filmmakers' Exposition for 9 years, Ph.D. in film from Syracuse University.

One has the choice of taking the financial risk or finding a "sugar-daddy"; but independence and financial support are a rare combination in the American film business. I would estimate that, dollar for dollar, the independent filmmaker takes more risk than any other kind of artist.

With the possibility of a slowdown in the economy, the small but increasing number of serious people who are trying to work in the media as artists rather than commercial craftsmen are going to suffer. Without corporate largess to rely on, non-commercial films must be brought to the attention of the general public and an audience created. One of the pitfalls here can be the urge to compromise for the sake of gaining popular approval. Media artists cannot continue to live by grants alone, but we may have to accept the fact that film and video can only rarely be both a popular and a "fine art" in the American system. Trying to adapt a message for a large audience can create so many compromises that only a vestige of personal vision remains. People are only recently beginning to value some of the prophetic personal visions of Van Dyke and Lorenz, the abstractions of Brakhage, the humor of Robert Nelson, etc.

If non-commercial independent filmmaking survives the next decade, split from commercial entertainment, it will need to discover a respectful audience that will permit the media artist to keep his freedom. All the grants the system can cough up will not keep independent filmmakers afloat for long. Robert Skull won't be trading classic Broughton films to Castelli patrons in the 80's. Film needs its roots in an informed paying public - until now there may have been an excuse for non support: incomplete understanding by the audience and technical imperfection on the filmmaker's part. We could very likely be at a turning point.

So, without Madison Avenue to help, how does one find an audience and/or a distributor? If a person can't lick these questions, independent non-commercial filmmaking becomes a hobby. The Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers formed this past summer and now has nearly 400 members who apparently agree that "video and filmmaking is more than just a job - that it goes beyond economics to involve the expression of broad human values." This organization testifies to the large number of films that aren't getting the distribution they should, and to the wasted talent that is reluctantly turning away to work in other fields.

We need to collect all the information we can on how successful and unsuccessful filmmakers handle their work and who to know to get films out and at least seen. Picture Start is a new organization that is helping here, but premature promotion, even by veterans, can be a mistake and this is where I believe the film festival circuit proves useful. Festivals should be fully understood before launching into a probe of the distribution game.

In 1964 I was teaching a college course in filmmaking and started a film festival to give students' work a little exposure. The Foothill festival was just underway and the Ann Arbor Festival was beginning. At that time there were about fifty films being made by independents in the U.S. that were worth public showing (the number has quadrupled in ten years and the festivals have increased from a dozen to 114). Curiosity was high and the few festivals around were a major outlet for "U-G" films and the few dollars given out in prize money were vital moral support at least. Like a lot of neophyte movements, most films were made for other members of the clique and early festivals were really "avant-garde" events and a great place to brain-storm all sorts of new forms and techniques and burn out the ideas that didn't work. Most audiences were challenged, but the shock wave in the art

world was inconsequential and Hollywood was unstirred. Rex Reed attended his first Independent Film Festival in 1974.

I've had a chance to watch the independent non-commercial film spring up through nine annual festivals which I somehow managed to fund each year. I saw technology changing the silents to sound, b & w to color, non-sync to lip sync, etc. I also saw the real independents separate from those building technique to launch into the commercial world. I've also read a lot of critical articles on film festivals by people who really don't understand them. If you have ever sent a film to a festival; waited for the return and received it late, battered and without a word of who saw it, how it was received, etc., you can understand how bitter resentment against a victimizing "establishment" festival can begin. Actually most festivals are run by well-intentioned people, harried by financial problems which often eclipse smooth public relations. They have chosen to put art in a competitive setting; pitting one person's vision against another's. Jurors are forced to make embarrassing choices between valid individual expressions; when they know their choices will be subjective, and the differences, stretched out in time, will be inconsequential. The director also is the butt of justifiable resentment by rejected entrants whose films have been used by the festival; seen by a mute and distant audience and returned without a shred of evidence to point to the reason for success or failure.

Festivals are flourishing mainly because there are an enormous number of films being made and few places to show them. The ease with which a festival can begin; a poster and a theatre are just about the only tangible ingredients for many, has necessitated a few caveats for people who would like to enter. It is nearly impossible to find any reliable critic to provide

up-to-date information on what festivals are well-run and which to avoid. There is such a broad range and short life span, possibly due to the connection of many of these festivals to Colleges, that reliable information is difficult. Nevertheless, I think festivals are worth encouraging because they can give the filmmaker predistribution feedback, a review, recognition, objective audience criticism and experienced emendations from the jury. Festivals operate on mutual need: if a festival can't provide the possibility of these things, it's exploiting the filmmaker and the filmmaker should bow out. Vigilance by the filmmakers can expose exploiting festivals and help keep them out of the hands of any critical clique, power block in distribution or single funding agency like AFI, for example. I can think of five general areas to watch carefully.

1. A festival needs a jury; a competent, diligent, objective group of at least three individuals who, besides judging films for reward, can clearly explain their rationale. This corps is the heart of any festival and festivals encouraging independents have not put enough effort into choosing good jurors. My own bias on choosing jurors over the past nine consecutive years is that they understand the actual process of filmmaking. The independently-made short film requires the sympathy of an individual who knows the limitations of small budgets, is receptive to "less-is-more" productions and can see the difference between a gimmick and a technical innovation. This sympathy keeps the juror from drawing lines between stylistic differences and helps constructive criticism.

No matter what background; a completely objective juror doesn't exist, and I really don't know how to guarantee a juror will be unbiased. Clearly the festival director and the entrant should know the juror's biases, not just have seen his films. I have found people like Ken Jacobs and Stan

Vanderbeek to be excellent jurors. But despite the fact that few entrants will have heard of them, film teachers are more consistently objective. All a festival director can do is try to find jurors with a variety of bias, and expect that they will cancel each other out. Another method is to ballot the audience. I have used a simple IBM card over the past six years with a rating scale and three criteria; originality, cinematography and clarity of theme, compute the results and award 20% of the total prize money on the basis of the results. Starting in 1973 I changed the title of the Festival to "Exposition" and removed the financial responsibility from the jurors - leaving them free to make "awards of merit" but dispensed with the idea of prize money. Each film selected for viewing (six 110 min. screenings) in the most recent Annual Exposition will receive a $2.00 per minute for each screening. The pre-screening committee, a loose confederation of teachers, choose the films to be screened. With this system, the money is more equitably divided and a broader spectrum of the entrants get some reinforcement.

2. A festival needs substantial prize money: at least $1,000. This figure is not totally arbitrary. The competitions attracting independents can count on at least 150 entries and certainly even the most critical director could find three programs in this collection. Assuming the director has taken the trouble to promote his festival and isn't located in an isolated area, he could finance $1,000 in prizes, pay his jurors an honorarium and break even. Festivals can, and do, show better returns in the right cities or at the right schools, but my point here is that 1) festival directors are exploiting the filmmaker when they offer less than $1,000 in prizes and 2) the days of loss-leader introductions are over, it's time the public, and colleges in particular, started to pay for their preview

of these non-commercial films. Students on many campuses aren't anxious to pay for "art films. But colleges are able to help subsidize festivals and will if it is made clear to them that these films are important. I don't mean to imply here that film festivals for independents need be tied to colleges, it is just that the products of the "underground" often complement college aims and colleges have the money to underwrite festivals. The real competition comes from the film industry itself. Entertainment films rent for as little as $50, and flood campuses. The level of cinematic literacy is rising. Unfortunately, it isn't yet at the level where curiosity of the fresh look at trends in style or film form is enough to pay the costs.

Of course one solution to financial problems would be to get industries like Kodak to sponsor festivals. I was a juror at the recent Kodak Teenage Awards (the age range of entrants is from 7 to 19) and they spared no expense. The 900 entries were subdivided and an army of jurors selected out semi-finalists for another jury to further select finalists and send them on to a final jury. All in all one of the most thorough festivals I've been part of. The final jury struck me as a conservative lot, with strong commercial roots, but their decisions were sensible; the product of wisdom, not impulse.

3. A festival should be efficient. Even assuming the festival undergoes a tour, I don't think any one festival should hang onto a film for more than six weeks. Short festivals, assuming the directors get together and co-ordinate the dates to prevent overlapping, do provide a quick recycle time. Often the rejects are left lying around unused for weeks until the screenings are over, and then sent back via fourth class, which in New York can mean a two-week trip across town. Large festivals like Chicago, New York, Atlanta, etc., are nothing but collections of small festivals with separate juries. Despite the

fact that the size of the larger festival commands more attention in the press and the promotion is flashier, the advantage to the entrant is minimal. Entry fees are higher, films are tied up longer and little is done to help the neophyte. Variety of response is important and I believe the small festival does a lot more for the individual.

4. All festivals should spell out a guarantee to the entrant in the "call-for-entries." Entrants should know who will judge their film, how much will be awarded, how the film might be used (TV?) and when will it be sent back and how. The entrant should be told, although it may be impossible at the time of mailing the call-for-entries, where his film could be shown and the filmmaker should have the option to restrict its use at any of these places.

I would be suspicious of a festival that fails to provide a complete explanation of what happened, i.e., who won, where the films were shown, and a detailed report from the jury. The jurors should explain their criteria and why they made their awards.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

5. Entry fees should be minimal. A fee helps the festival to discourage curious amateurs with marginal quality work. Last year 327 films were entered into the Independent Film-Maker's Exposition, with a $2.00 entry fee which barely covered return mailing costs. At least 100 of these should not have been entered, possibly because the makers did not understand the weakness of their films or had not seen enough other comparable films to make a judgement. I think these marginal quality films came in because the filmakers wanted them off their hands and were hoping for an outside chance that some juror might find something redeeming in the work. A veteran filmaker learns quickly not to show work "in progress" and expect meaningful criticism. Films that are nothing more than visualized treatments often clog festival operations and irk the critic who is trying to feed back constructive criticism to the serious filmaker. The large number of entries forces the use of pre-screening committees to weed out enough so that the jurors aren't inundated with so many they can't make a clear decision. Even with some selection a final juror is often faced with a hundred or more titles in the few days he has to set aside for judging. Obviously this kind of situation doesn't help constructive criticism. In the rush to see as many films as possible a juror often OD's and titles begin to scramble in his head. Long films suffer, the slower more subtle films wash out and when the time comes for a decision the snappy tight films that did not demand much of the viewer come to the surface and get awards. If entries could be reduced more complete consideration can be given to "difficult" films but I don't like the idea of raising the entry fee to accomplish this. The New York,San Francisco and American(EFLA) festivals all charge substantial entry fees. The CINE competition charges a [redacted] $45.00 for a shot at their eagles. Maybe it's worth it but I don't think a festival should be a pari-mutual event,with the filmaker's entry fees simply re-allocated into prize money.

I suppose a final note should include a comment on the handful of ongoing festivals. Sinking Creek appears sympathetic with independents and the role of the art-film. The organizers have relied on the establishment purveyors of art in film like Barbara Van Dyke(Flaherty Film

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Seminar),Esmee Dick(Phoenix Films),Karen Cooper(Film Forum)and Adrienne Mancia(MOMA) which represents to me an in-grown New York bias with roots in the formal art criticism world. An incomplete film would get little sympathy from these women who spend a lot of time looking at films and are acutely aware of style and what has already been done. They enjoy emotion,even sentimentality in their films and are quite aware of the person who made the film. In dealing with this clique it might help to starve a little,forward your mail through an address like Soho and practice a Savage Messiah routine. Jonas Mekas is probably the best known cult-critic and pops up at various festivals as a juror. After years of championing the avant-garde,he has developed a sophisticated bias that is a bit self-conscious and formal for my taste,but he is always willing to support his reactions with an explanation. You know where he stands and its hard to fault him for his honest feelings.

The Bellvue(Wa.)festival is well-run and keeps a healthy mix of jurors. Ann Arbor,on the other hand,requires a note of explanation for its idiosyncracies. The films seem to be selected with a concern for the Ann Arbor audiences which are a strange blend of radical chic and sophomoric emotion. Films are cheered or booed and during the late sixties the bias swung from abstraction to sociopolitical criticism. In dealing with entrants the festival has not always been above board; prize money has been distorted,no reactions to the films are provided and you don't know who the jurors will be. Still,in all, the festival has soul. It was a regional festival for years before it became open to film-makers around the country and it still reflects local taste. To understand Ann Arbor you really need to attend the screenings there.

The Chicago,Atlanta and New York festivals are slick commercial operations with high entry fees and only include the non-commercial independent as an obligatory side show. If one has the confidence to join this league of high-rollers it has been known to pay off.

I can't ignore my own floating festival,which in its various incarnations at St. Lawrence University,Washington State,Central Michigan, Syracuse and the Brooklyn Academy of Music has helped a lot of beginning filmakers. Despite the difficulties I have encountered in funding it (about $6,000 each year)it has never failed to provide a complete accounting of what went on and how most films were received. Most of the annual budget goes into the awards to the entrants,only the projectionists

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

are paid, and until last year the only requirement made of the audience was that they fill out a ballot. I felt that the criticism would be more free and open if the audience did not have to pay and I felt less inclined to please them in the programming.

An endless string of colleges and museums continue to sponsor small festivals and in them I see the real hope of the festival format. Festivals are like a gauntlet a serious filmartist should run if he wants to reach a general audience. With the help of festival reactions, a filmaker can approach or avoid distribution with more surety that the film "works" and communicates. How to succeed in distribution however, requires cunning and strategy in addition to having a good film. Moralizing, like the preceeding, won't have much effect in the marketplace, but a few contacts and some hard facts will and hopefully I can provide a few in a sequel to this article.